

Juicy fruits

Pick the sweetest peaches and the tastiest tomatoes every time with our insider tips on buying the best produce this season.

Plus: How to store fruits and veggies to keep them tasty and fresh longer—and cut down waste.

this time of year, it's tempting to load up on all those gorgeous fruits and veggies piled high at supermarkets and farm stands. But no matter how picky you are when you dig through those mounds, you can still end up with a mealy peach or a tasteless tomato. Yech! And what a waste of money. Even though many stores will take back bad produce, you're more likely to chuck it. Overbuying can create lots of waste, despite your best intentions to work those fruits and veggies into healthy meals and snacks. Turns out, produce is the most thrown-out food in U.S. households. A University of Arizona study estimated that Americans toss about half a pound a day.

So we turned to produce pros at top food chains, universities, and restaurants for tricks to finding the juiciest, tastiest fruits and vegetables, and storing them so they stay fresh longer. And if you're looking for inspiration for what to do with all those berries or tomatoes before they go to waste, see two recipes from our test kitchens on pages 43 and 45.

In addition to using our expert tips, you can keep an eye out for new labels, like "Ripe 'N Ready" and "ripeSense," which claim to indicate that fruit is ripe or tasty. (Note: We haven't yet tested these products to see whether they meet these claims.)

Also, starting in October, all produce will have country-of-origin labeling, thanks to new government rules. That's helpful because you may not want to buy stuff that's been shipped around the world. Some foreign produce has higher pesticide residues that you can't necessarily wash off, and transporting it generates global-warming gasses. See page 47 for details on how to avoid the worst pesticides and save on organic produce.

MONICA BUCK; PROP STYLING: LYNDA WHITE; FOOD STYLING: TONI BROGAN

Pick the best *fruits* of the season



Apples

The best have smooth, clear skin. To check for freshness, rub your thumb across the skin. If it wrinkles, put it back. **Keep them** in a cool, dark place or the fridge, away from strong-smelling foods so they won't absorb odors. They'll stay fresh for four to six weeks.

Pro trick Get rid of waxy coatings by rinsing with warm (not cold) water, says Russ Parsons, author of "How to Pick a Peach" (Houghton Mifflin, 2007).



Avocados

The best have dark-green to black skin (the Haas variety). Other types stay light green. To check for ripeness, squeeze one gently in your palm. It should give without feeling soft.

Keep them in a brown paper bag and store at room temp to ripen. In a rush? Add an apple or a banana to the bag.

Pro trick Chef Alfredo Sandoval says not-quite-ripe avocado slices can be improved with a sprinkle of salt.

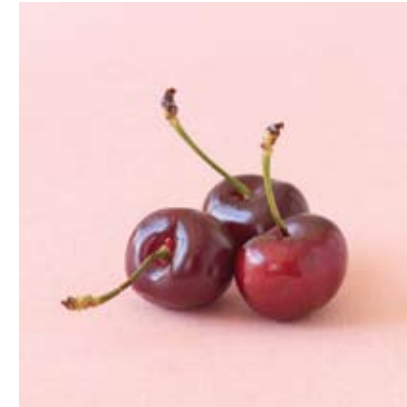


Berries

The best are plump and dry with a sweet aroma. The white "bloom" that dusts blueberries and raspberries indicates a good, ripened berry, says cookbook author Rick Rodgers.

Keep them refrigerated, unwashed in a dry, covered container.

Pro trick Blend blueberries, lemonade concentrate, and water into a smoothie, says Linda Carucci, chef director at the Art Institute of California-San Francisco.



Cherries (*Bing*)

The best are plump with bright, shiny red-to-mahogany skins. Most fruits are shiny at their freshest, says Jeff Bohnen, manager of Draeger's market in San Mateo, Calif.

Keep them refrigerated, unwashed in a plastic bag. Cherries with healthy green stems attached keep better than those without stems.

Pro trick Float cherries in a clear bowl of ice water for an attractive snack.



Grapes

The best are large and plump with firmly attached stems and nice bright color, whether they're red, black, or green.

Keep them refrigerated, unwashed, and loosely packed in a plastic bag. A bad grape can ruin the bunch, so discard spoiled grapes before storing.

Pro trick At Citrio outside Boston, chef Eric Bogardus says a handful of grapes lends salads surprising flavor, especially when paired with chicken and tuna.



Melon (*cantaloupe, honeydew, watermelon*)

The best have a clean stem area and a sweet aroma. Ripe cantaloupes have golden netting; the best honeydews have a creamy yellow color and weigh about 5 pounds; tasty watermelons have a healthy sheen and a yellow underbelly.

Keep them in the fridge and wash skins before cutting (to avoid bacteria).

Pro trick Purée melon and freeze it in ice-cube trays for use in cocktails or punch.



Peaches and nectarines

The best have a background color that's creamy gold. Also, the dimpled area around the stem should be a neutral color and free of redness.

Keep them in the fridge or at room temp in a brown paper bag to speed ripening.

Pro trick Freeze peaches you can't use. Cover peeled and chopped peaches with apple or white grape juice in a freezer-proof container. Use one cup of juice for every four cups of fruit.

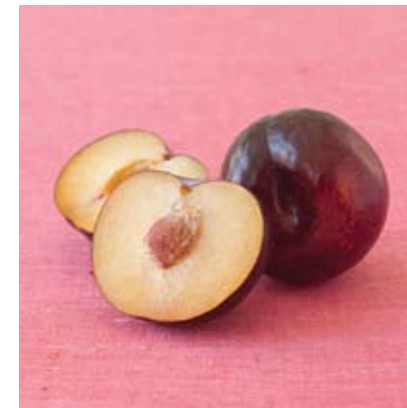


Pears

The best are firm if you're poaching or baking them, or slightly soft and fragrant if you're eating them raw.

Keep them in a paper bag at room temp to speed ripening, then refrigerate.

Pro trick Before serving, sprinkle pear slices (and apples too!) with lemon juice to help prevent browning. Parsons says he likes to serve pears sliced into wedges with walnuts and a sliver of good blue cheese.

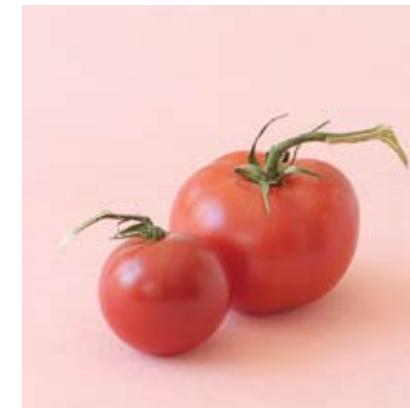


Plums

The best have even color and no brown blotches. Also, ripe plums can feel fairly firm to slightly soft to the touch.

Keep them at room temperature in a paper bag to speed ripening. Store ripe plums in the fridge.

Pro trick For a simple and light summer dessert, you can grill halved, pitted plums until they are lightly charred and then top them with a scoop of vanilla ice cream.



Tomatoes (*yes, they're fruit!*)

The best have a sweet smell and vibrant color. And they should be more soft than firm to the touch. Local tomatoes may be juicier, because they're often left to mature longer on the vine.

Keep them at room temperature, but not in direct sunlight to ripen.

Pro trick For fast, no-cook pasta sauce, Carucci grates ripe tomatoes and tosses them with torn basil leaves and grated Parmesan cheese.

Mixed-berry tart with lemon curd Serves 8

- 1 9-inch, ready-to-bake crust
- $\frac{3}{4}$ cups sugar
- 3 large eggs
- 2 teaspoons finely grated lemon zest
- $\frac{1}{2}$ cup freshly squeezed lemon juice
- $\frac{1}{4}$ cup ($\frac{1}{2}$ stick) unsalted butter
- 5 cups mixed fresh berries, such as blueberries, raspberries, blackberries, and sliced strawberries
- Confectioner's sugar, for dusting, optional

1. Bake the crust until golden as package directs. Cool.
2. To make the lemon curd: Whisk together the sugar, eggs, lemon zest, and lemon juice in a medium saucepan. Place the pan over medium-low heat and cook, stirring constantly, until the mixture thickens to the consistency of loose pudding, about 15 minutes (don't let mixture come to a simmer, or the eggs will curdle). Strain through a fine-mesh sieve into a bowl. Stir the butter into the hot mixture until melted. Let curd cool, then cover surface with wax paper and chill at least 2 hours.
3. Fill the baked crust with lemon curd and top with the mixed berries. Dust the top with confectioner's sugar.



Pick the best *veggies* of the season



Beans (*green or yellow*)

The best are thinner. Skip over any that are soft, wrinkled, or lumpy. To judge crispness, bend before you buy. "Anything that's bendy is getting old," says Bohnen.

Keep them in an air-tight container and don't snap off the ends before storing.

Pro trick When you're ready to prep beans, simply line them up on a cutting board with the stems all at the same end. Chop off stems in one swift motion.



Beets (*red*)

The best have perky greens still attached. Also smooth, firm, small globes will be the tastiest.

Keep them in the crisper. Lop off the green tops before refrigerating; they're great in salads or cooked like spinach.

Pro trick Add a couple of small, peeled, shredded beets to chocolate cake batter, says Carucci. "It makes for an incredibly moist and nutritious addition that no one will be able to figure out."



Broccoli

The best are tightly budded and have dark-green to almost-blue sprouts. If the buds are yellowish or you can easily spread them out with your fingers, that means they're old.

Keep them refrigerated in a plastic bag.

Pro trick For a simple side, Bogardus tosses blanched broccoli spears with olive oil, salt, and pepper, then finishes cooking them on the grill. You can do the same thing with cauliflower.



Cabbage (*green, red, purple*)

The best have a smooth round head, and even coloring. Also, look for heads with fairly thick, pliable leaves. They'll be more tender and juicy.

Keep them in an airtight bag or container in the refrigerator.

Pro trick Cut cabbage with only stainless steel knives, says Kathy Maister, founder of Startcooking.com. Chemicals in the cabbage react with other metals and can turn the knife and the cabbage black.



Corn (*yellow, white, bicolor*)

The best ones have bright green husks. Pop one of the kernels with your finger. If you see slightly cloudy juice, it's fresh. No juice or thick juice means it's old.

Keep them in the fridge in their husks.

Pro trick For Bogardus' easy "cream" sauce, purée raw kernels, strain into a pot, and bring to a simmer until the sauce thickens to a creamy consistency. Drizzle the sauce over grilled vegetables, chicken, or fish.



Mushrooms

The best are small to medium in size. Creamy white or light brown caps that are closed around the mushroom stem are signs of freshness.

Keep them unwashed in a paper bag in the fridge. A plastic bag will trap moisture and promote spoilage.

Pro trick To season portobellos before grilling, lightly coat them with your favorite salad dressing, says Margo Kraus, dietitian for the Mushroom Council.



Onions (*yellow, red, white*)

The best are firm, blemish-free globes with paper-thin skins.

Keep them in a dry, dark, well-ventilated place, but not in the fridge. Don't keep onions near potatoes because they can absorb a potato's moisture and spoilage—speeding ethylene gas.

Pro trick To minimize tears while chopping, Carucci chills onions first. This slows the chemical reaction of the juices when they hit the air.



Peppers (*bell*)

The best have deep colors. According to Penn State Cooperative Extension specialists, the deeper the red, orange, or purple, the sweeter the flavor and the higher the vitamins A and C.

Keep them in a plastic bag in the fridge, whole, dry, and unwashed.

Pro trick After roasting peppers, don't wash off charred skin—you'll rinse off the juicy flavor, according to Parsons. Instead, peel off the skin with your fingers.



Potatoes (*red*)

The best ones have bright red skins that are smooth and few, if any, shallow eyes. **Keep them** in a cool place away from light up to two weeks. Don't put them in the fridge—moisture will encourage sprouting. Also, keep them away from onions! (See "Onions" section.)

Pro trick If you like the crisp, golden exterior of a baked potato, skip wrapping your spuds in foil, which steams rather than crisps the skin, says Maister.



Zucchini and yellow squash

The best ones have firm, smooth, shiny skins and are small.

Keep them unwashed in a plastic bag in the fridge. But it's best to use zucchini within two or three days of purchase.

Pro trick Because zucchini cooks quickly, the thinner you slice it, the more likely it will fall apart during cooking, says Parsons. If you want zucchini to hold its shape, cut it into thick chunks.

Panzanella salad

Serves 6 to 8

The secret to this rustic Italian bread salad is to use the ripest, juiciest tomatoes you can find. This recipe is also a smart way to use up stale bread.

- 6 cups day-old, country-style bread, cut into 1-inch cubes
- 1½ lbs. ripe tomatoes, cored and cut into chunks
- 1 large cucumber, peeled and cut into chunks
- 1 yellow bell pepper, cored and cut into chunks
- ½ red onion, thinly sliced
- 3 tablespoons roughly chopped fresh basil
- 2½ tablespoons red wine vinegar
- 6 tablespoons olive oil
- Kosher salt and freshly ground black pepper, to taste

1. Preheat oven to 350° F. Arrange the bread cubes in a single layer on a baking sheet. Toast, turning once halfway through, until golden all over, about 15 minutes. Cool.
2. In a large bowl combine the bread cubes with the remaining ingredients. Season the salad with salt and pepper, to taste. Toss and let stand 5 minutes before serving.



Squeeze and sniff like the pros

Tasting is just one way experts who pick out produce for some of the country's top food markets judge ripeness. They also eyeball, sniff, and squeeze their way around the produce department—and so should you!

1 Have a taste. “The real litmus test is does it taste good?” says Karen Christensen, global produce senior coordinator for Whole Foods Market. So ask for a sample.

2 Take a sniff. Fruit should have a sweet aroma; veggies should smell fresh. “When they’re bad, certain vegetables like asparagus tips will have a foul odor,” says Peter Romano, produce manager of Fairway Markets in New York.

3 Do the bend test. To make sure veggies such as green beans, asparagus, celery, and zucchini will be crisp and fresh, bend them. Anything that’s even slightly soft and pliable is past its prime.

4 Give it a squeeze. The freshest, ripest stuff has a slight spring or “squeeziness” to it that older produce doesn’t, says Jeff Bohnen.

5 Weigh it in your hand. In general, the heavier the fruit feels when you pick it up or cradle it in your hand, the more juicy it will taste. This is especially helpful when picking pineapples, melons, and citrus fruits.

6 Ask what’s good. “People should always ask the produce clerk for recommendations,” says Bohnen. “New items come in every day, and one day the melons might be good while the next batch might not taste the same. A clerk can tell you that.”

7 Return the bad ones. “With some foods there’s no way of telling until you slice into them,” says Bohnen. So your best recourse is to take bad produce back to the store. That’s what store produce buyers do when they get a rotten batch. Draeger’s and the other markets we spoke to have money-back return policies. Ask about return policies where you shop.

Best times to buy

Sure, you can find summer-grown fruit year-round, but you risk biting into something mealy or brown inside if it’s out of season, says Fairway Market’s Peter Romano. So now’s the time to buy the produce listed in our guide. Here’s what to shop for in the spring and fall.

Spring

- Arugula
- Asparagus
- Collard greens
- Dandelion greens
- Herbs (chives, cilantro, dill, marjoram, mint, parsley, thyme)
- Peas (snap and snow)
- Radishes
- Rhubarb
- Spinach
- Strawberries

Fall

- Brussels sprouts
- Carrots
- Cauliflower
- Celeriac
- Citrus fruits
- Cranberries
- Fennel
- Kale
- Mustard greens
- Parsnips
- Pumpkins
- Quinces
- Rutabagas
- Sweet potatoes

- Turnips
- Winter squash

Year round

- Mangos
- Bananas

tip Don’t store bruised or damaged fruit. Eat it right away, but first cut off the yucky spots—bacteria can thrive there.

Adapted from Cornell University’s Northeast Regional Food Guide

FACE OFF

Debbie Meyer Green Bags vs. plastic bags

In TV ads, Debbie Meyer Green Bags are billed as the “ultimate produce saver.” The ads claim the bags keep your fruits and veggies tasting fresher longer by absorbing and removing the spoilage-making ethylene gas that produce naturally releases. To see if the bags keep produce any fresher than regular plastic bags, we pitted them against quart- and gallon-size Ziploc storage bags and the freebie plastic bags you get in the produce section of the supermarket. After weeks of storing apples, asparagus, bananas, basil, berries, broccoli, carrots, grapes, lettuce, and tomatoes in the Green bags, and the same foods for the same length of time either in the Ziplocs or the

freebie bags, we found that only bananas fared significantly better in Green Bags. After two weeks they were still mostly yellow and firm. Everything else stored in the two types of regular plastic bags had less mold or none at all compared with food stored in the Green Bags.

The bottom line Unless you buy lots of bananas, skip the Green Bags, which cost 50 cents a piece (they come in packages of 20 for \$10, plus \$6.95 for shipping) vs. pennies for regular plastic bags.



How to save on organics

Focus on the riskiest produce



Buying organic is a good way to cut your exposure to potentially harmful pesticides, but it can get expensive. One way to save is to limit organic purchases to fruits and veggies that have the most dangerous pesticide residues when grown conventionally. The worst of the bunch are listed below, in order of risk, based on a new analysis of government data by the nonprofit Organic Center. (Produce with the lowest pesticide risk includes citrus fruits, bananas, pineapples, and onions.) Note that our list refers to U.S. produce. Some imported items have higher pesticide levels. The “risk index score” for an imported peach is almost five times that of a domestic peach; for sweet bell peppers, it’s nearly 5½ times as high. Other high-risk produce: imported grapes, nectarines, lettuce, and cucumbers. So you might want to skip those if you can find only imports. Also be wary of overseas “organics,” where regulatory oversight might not be as reliable.

Buy these organic

Riskiest fruits

- Imported grapes
- Cranberries
- Nectarines
- Peaches
- Strawberries
- Pears
- Apples
- Cherries

Riskiest vegetables

- Green beans
- Sweet bell peppers
- Celery
- Cucumbers
- Potatoes
- Tomatoes
- Peas
- Lettuce